EXISTENTIALISM AND PSYCHIATRY*

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IT is difficult to define precisely what existentialism is, not because existentialism is lacking in definable components, but because it is endowed with so many.

Existentialism has many substantive manifestations, in art, literature, philosophy, etc. But in and of itself existentialism is not "demonstrable". It is a dynamism, a social, cultural, and intellectual movement. As such, it can best be understood in its historic derivation.

Existentialism is primarily and essentially European but it needs must concern us deeply. Our interest in existentialism is not a pure exercise in intellectualism, but a wise attempt to anticipate what is bound to confront us in the not too remote future.

Europe and we are an ocean apart, but we are culturally contiguous. Between Europe and ourselves there is a time lag of some twenty years or so, in the emergence of historic and cultural issues and problems. It is therefore a safe assumption that what is culturally crucial to Europe today, will be crucial to us one generation hence. Existentialism agitates Europe today. It will stir us on the morrow. Even now one can perceive its prodromal signs in our midst.

What is existentialism? First and foremost it is a movement of protest. It is a challenge to, and a denial of, things past, of the philosophical, the theological, the psychological, the aesthetic, the moral, and, I need add, the scientific theories, dogmas, and assumptions of the past. It is, in the phrase of Nietzsche, an attempt to transvalue values—by initially denying the validity of existing values.

Existentialism is revolutionary and culturally discontinuous. Existentialism does not offer to modify classical thought—it denies its validity. In contrast to classical philosophy which tries to make life conform to thought, existentialism seeks to make thought conform to

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life. Existentialism reduces life from that what we would like it to be, to what it is.

The existentialist movement constitutes an unprecedented reorientation of human thought in that it denies existence to everything of which we are not immediately and indubitably aware.[1]

Existentialism is a challenge of colossal dimension and of transcending importance. Existentialism has engaged the interest, and has enlisted the intellectual, aesthetic, and creative energies of some of the most competent and earnest of men: poets, philosophers, playwrights, painters, novelists, theologians, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

Existentialism has its antagonists as well as its protagonists, and both are in earnest. Norberto Bobbio, Professor of Legal Philosophy at the University of Padua, and Editor of the *Rivista di Filosofia*, wrote a series of essays on existentialism, titling them *The Philosophy of Decadentism.* "Existentialism," he wrote, "is a mode of philosophizing which in a strange and wonderful way accords with the philosophical vocation and, I would say, the philosophic vogue of our time. As such, we harbor it with an easy conscience or defiantly, with pride or repugnance, and we harbored it as an aspiration or as a temptation even before it was revealed to us in specific terms." [2]

Bobbio recognizes that existentialism is a philosophy of crisis. He fails however to identify the true derivation of that crisis. He ascribes it to the disordered exuberance and unrestrained vitality that follows on the weakening of authority. By authority he intends "the supreme principles which inspire every manifestation of spiritual life both in the theoretical and in the practical spheres." [3] It were profitless to argue Bobbio's criticism of existentialism. However, we can accept his notations on "crisis" and "the weakening of authority."

Existentialism *is* a philosophy of crisis, and this being the case we needs must ask what is the derivation, and the nature of this crisis. Also, since the weakening of authority is both antecedent and consequent to crisis, we need to inquire what authority has been weakened.*

As the starting point I would take the years that witnessed the rise of the Modern Age and the birth of Modern Science—that is, the last decades of the sixteenth and the early years of the seventeenth century. These are the years of Galileo (1564-1642) and of Descartes (1596-

* Needless to say time will allow for no more than a hasty and, I fear, somewhat superficial treatment of these questions. Those who would study these matters more deeply will find José Ortega y Gasset's *Man and Crisis,* W. W. Norton & Co., N. Y. and Luis Diez del Corral's *The Rape of Europe,* Macmillan Co., 1959, most helpful and illuminating.

1660). This was the *new* era, emergent from Mediaevalism, and the Renaissance. This was the Age when mankind, aided and abetted by its scientists and determinist philosophers, took in earnest the exhorting counsel of Francis Bacon, to wrest from nature the secrets of its ways, so that man might master both nature and his own destiny.

No age had ever been ushered in so brilliantly, and with so much hope and expectation. No age had been welcomed with so much enthusiasm by those who were called, and who considered themselves to be "the enlightened".

It was not long, however, before both the hopes and the expectations of that nascent era were dimmed by frustrating reality. Life became not better, but worse. The common man suffered not only physical hardships and deprivations, but what was of greater evil, moral degradation, and a deep, inextricable confusion as to life's meanings and values. Emergent science implemented the industrial revolution, with its nasty slums, its disenfranchised proletariat, its ugly factories, and its gross inhumanities.

The Modern Age had hardly reached its adolescence when it was literally macerated by the bloody and disruptive French Revolution. Inspired as it was by so much of the heroic and the humane, this revolution, as revolutions are likely to, soon "got out of hand", monstrously consuming countless thousands of humans, including most of its own initiators. The French Revolution was even more disruptive than bloody. The French Revolution left in its heritage the miseries of Nationalism and of the Citizens' Army. The French Revolution made way for the man on horseback, for Napoleon, the ambitious and unscrupulous usurper. His breed has become all-too-well known to us in the passing decades. Titled as they are—Duce, Gauleiter, Caudillo, Fuehrer, or Comintern Secretary—they have taken it upon themselves to "carve out" the destinies of Europe in the patterns of their ambitions. They have brought misery and death to countless millions, and have sown dissension, suspicion, hatred, and blood feuds among the peoples. Yet they, the ambitious and the unscrupulous usurpers of power, are not the primal evil. They are secondary and consequent evils. The primal evil is of another and deeper nature.

The crisis of our age, as has been observed, is of a moral, of a spiritual nature. Ortega has phrased it well in affirming that "crisis occurs when the system of convictions belonging to a previous genera-

tion gives way to a vital state in which man remains without these convictions and, therefore, without a world." [4] It is the loss of convictions that engenders our world crisis, a crisis which is moral in nature, and hence more menacing.

The modern crisis was long in the making but precipitous in its emergence. It came to the fore with the First World War, and has become enlarged and intensified ever since. How well, and with what keen prescience, Viscount Grey summed up the tragic outbreak of the World War of 1914: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

For more than three score years, that is, from the middle of the nineteenth century until 1914, Europe lived in the persuasion that it had attained basic stability and had mastered the means for a continuing melioration of mankind's lot. The means were obvious and simple, interrelated and mutually reinforcing. They were: education, industry, and democracy. They were means, but also innately good and rewarding in themselves. It was good to be educated; industry yielded the products essential to a good life; democracy extended the prerogatives and the responsibilities of government and enhanced the dignity of the individual.

These persuasions were bolstered by the moralisms and "sage saws", native and dear to the Victorians. There is, it was argued, a logic, a rationality, a basic sense to life. If one played the game according to the rules, worked hard, stayed sober, saved his money, was decent, and otherwise did his duty by God, country and family, one was bound to prosper, and the world too, accordingly. The greater number of Europeans believed all this in earnest.

But then came the World War with its Armageddon aftermath. The conceits, the persuasions, and the faiths of the world, were now discredited by gaunt reality. Experience proved them hollow, false, corrupted, and corrupting, thus giving warrant for Sartre's later affirmation, "Human life begins on the far side of despair" (*The Flies*).

The newer generations of sensitive, inquisitive, thoughtful men, contemplating the ruin about them, denied the household gods of their fathers. But, they sought no new gods! They turned to other ways and other sources for the meaning of human life and of human experience. Their search and their labors came to fruition in existentialism.

I have said the crisis was long in the making, and that is correct.

There were, in effect, existentialists before existentialism came into being. There were some early "prophets of doom", a cletch of Cassandras, who foresaw and foretold the oncoming tragedies. They were a varied lot, including theologians, philosophers, poets, novelists, and artists. Kierkegaard was among them, and Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Stern, and Kafka. These early existentialists were the "odd men" of the Victorian era, those whom Max Nordau labelled the Degenerates.*

The global crash of 1914 heralded the emergence of the Crisis of our Age, and to this Crisis we can credit the materialization of Existentialism.

Existentialism is, as we have already noted, a movement of protest, and a philosophy of despair. These are its initial and elemental qualities. But existentialism is more than formalized protest and despair. It is creative far more than it is polemical.

Existentialism is not nihilism. It is, on the contrary, an energic, creative impulsion. It has animated and inspired the graphic arts, poetry, drama, and every form of prose literature. It has productively agitated and illumined the philosophers, the psychologists, and the theologians.

That is precisely why it is so difficult to "define" existentialism, save in terms of its historic derivations. For the problem is: whose existentialism is prototypical—Sartre's, Camus', Kafka's, Nietzsche's, Kierkegaard's, Jaspers', Heidegger's, Tillich's, or Martin Buber's? Existentialism, however, is not a babel of tongues, not a rat's nest of confusion that carries a delusionally unifying label. In Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, Buber, et al., the accents differ—but the tongue is common. It is that of existentialism.

The key factor in the comprehension of existentialism is existence. This affirmation seems tautological. All existing things—exist! But that is not the sense in which existentialism speaks of existence. For the existentialist existence is not, like endurance, a derivative state. Existence is dynamic, creative, emergent, mercurial—a flux of "being, becoming, and being". This affirmation is not novel nor entirely new. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus propounded a comparable version of living experience. Nothing remains what it is, everything passes into its opposite, all comes out of all; all is all. But where the Greek theory was formulated primarily to *describe* the flux of experience, the existentialist intends his version of existence initially as a protest against the philo-

* Even so sage and cosmopolitan a spirit as George Brandes found nothing in Kierkegaard that merited more than derision and dispraise.

sophical and moralistic systems which have arisen in time and which hedge existence with a host of logical formulations and moral injunctions. Secondarily, but in an even larger intent, existentialism affirms the sovereign creativity and "rationality" of pristine existence, of existence unencumbered by preconceptions as to what existence *ought* to be. The rationality of existence, the existentialist insists, is innate in existence and emerges in the existence of being and becoming. All of this is reflected in the existentialist affirmation that "Truth is not formulated but lived". "Classical philosophy considers existence a secondary phenomenon, an appearance behind which it should be possible to discover a rational order, invisible on the surface."[5] But the existentialist reverses the order and the emphasis: existence is primary and authentic,—thought and theory are secondary and derivative. The world and life do make sense, but not in the way orthodox philosophy, and doctrinaire moralities suppose they do. Certain it is that historically, and most notably during the past century, the orthodox philosophies and the doctrinaire moralities have been shown to have only the most tenuous relevance to experienced reality.

The emphasis here, be it noted, is on the *orthodox* philosophies, and the *doctrinaire* moralities. Existentialism does not deny the possibility of philosophy, or morality. But, the existentialist affirms that, to be authentic, philosophy and morality will need to be not *antecedent* and *a priori* to experience, but derivative from existence.

There is a good deal that is seemingly paradoxical and contradictory in the existentialist contentions as represented in the aforegoing. If existence is neither to be envisaged, nor governed by any antecedently formulated theories or preconcepts, but is conceived as purely self-emergent and auto-directive, then can existence in effect add up to anything more than a spiralling anarchy that must inevitably end in dissolution? Reading Sartre, one can perceive in the destinies of his principal characters just such spiralling anarchy that ends in dissolution.

"Sartre's man," wrote Norberto Bobbio, "is the sheer antithesis of the Christian God, who creates the world out of nothingness; he (Sartre) creates nothingness out of the world".[6] But that is Sartre's existentialism, predominantly protest in character. Other existentialists, notably the philosophers, psychologists, and the theologians, have gone beyond the protest phase and have concerned themselves with the ontological aspects of existence.

Confessedly, the ontological is the least well developed and the least well defined component of existentialism. Yet it is crucial to, indeed the very complement of, existentialism. For it is its ontological perimeter, framing the miscellany of existential critique, psychology, and philosophy, that renders the existentialist entirety meaningful and comprehensible.

The term ontology is commonplace in existentialist vernacular. Sartre's *L'Etre et le Néant* carries the subtitle *Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Existentialism itself is not infrequently referred to as an ontological philosophy. However, ontology in existential expositions most commonly refers to the operational modality of existence: to the *becoming* phase of existential being.

In existential psychology, as expounded by Heidegger, being is of two orders, *being* with the small "b," and being that is written and understood with the capital "B." The initial being, that of the small "b," emerges out of nothingness, and sequentially yields to nothingness, which, in turn, yields being of the small "b." The whole experimental process adds up, in the perspective of extended existence, to *being* with the capital "B." This cyclical process involving the sequential flow of nothingness into being, and being into nothingness *is* the ontological dimension of existence.

All this is confessedly an uncommon formulation, and difficult, at first, to comprehend. It will help to understand that by nothingness the existentialist intends not insubstantiality but an irrelevant state, that is one that is not pertinent to any immediacy: like "yesterday's snow."

Existential psychology strongly emphasizes the certainty and the authenticity of the experienced moment, in the here and the now. This existential moment is forged into being out of the antecedent nothingness. The existential moment in turn will yield to nothingness, from which the succeeding authentic existential moment will emerge.

This formulation displaces and discredits the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am—and affirms instead "I am what I am," or "I am as I am", or "I am because I am". This, in effect, is a paraphrase of Jahve's answer to Moses. When Moses, in the presence of the Burning Bush asked God (Jahve) what is his name, God answered Moses: "I am that I am".

There is something appealing in the affirmation of the authenticity

of "being in the here and the now." It is so patently real, so immediate and so undeniable. And yet it is also so very inadequate. For the here and the now brings with it the echo of the "there and then" of the "here and the now *that was*," and that now is melted into the nothingness of the past, that no longer has an immediacy, save in the residual pattern of individual antecedent, and collective history. The "here and the now" is authentic and immediate, but it is also impermanent, fugitive, and evanescent.

Contemplated in the larger perspective, the existential moment is seen as the link between past and future. The existential moment of the *here* and the *now* is bounden to, and gives issue to the *there* and *thereafter*. In this sense then, the existential moment is ontological. But it affirms only the ontology of the operational modality of existence. It is initial but not amply definitive. It relates to process, not to end result.

It must be said that if existentialism did no more than propound the *operational* ontology of existence, it would already have done a great deal; for modern science has shied away from ontology: ontology smacks too much of vitalism.

The philosophic and the theological existentialist—among the latter we may count Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, and Nicholas Berdyaev* are not, however, content to rest with an operational ontology of existence, one that is merely concerned with the *process* of being; they reach beyond, to the ontology of the total experience of being, of being with the capital "B". Existence, they argue, cannot be the ultimate rationale of existence. All human experience controverts that postulate. There is, they insist, a perceptible pattern to human life, a pattern which emerges from the immediacies of sequential existence. This pattern is not accidental to existence, but rather attests to the significance of extended existence pattern indwelling, but not manifest, in the singular existential moment. This pattern is the ontology of *being*, with the capital "B".

The philosophic and theological existentialists are not thus attempting to sneak in, under the cloak of existentialism, the old and familiar ontology of predetermination. They most earnestly subscribe to the existentialist faith that "the visage of the world was not preordained, that man is free to mold one that suits him, and to abandon it as soon

* Will Herberg, *Four Existentialist Theologians*, Doubleday & Co., N. Y., 1958.

as it ceases to suit him".[7]

It is here that we come plumb of the relevance of existentialism to psychiatry. The metaphysics of existentialism and its psychological *aperçus* may interest the psychiatrist as a man of this age, himself involved in its cultural crisis. The ontological concepts of existentialism, however, deeply relate to the *métier* of the psychiatrist, and involve his professional operations.

Let me state the arguments bluntly. All problems that properly fall within the psychiatrist's ambient are ultimately existential in character, and ontological in nature. The psychiatrist is called on to treat the individual who is experiencing an existential thwart, whose being and existence encounter frustration and negation, who cannot, in other words, get on with the flux of his existence, and is thus hampered in effecting his unique ontologic fulfilment. To continue in this metaphoric mood it may be said that classical psychiatry, including psychoanalysis, is primarily and almost exclusively concerned with "what blocks or diverts the individual"; existential psychiatry, on the other hand, is concerned with what blocks the individual from getting *on to where.**

The extension of concern from "what blocks the individual" to "what blocks him from getting where," is of crucial significance. Failure to comprehend this is responsible for the frequency of that cynical comment: "His analysis was successful, but he himself is no better." The "where" of the psychiatric problem is not to be determined by an *a priori* judgment, nor in accordance with some pattern or schedule of normalcy. It can be grasped only by an intimate study of the existential history of the individual, and this is more than his anamnesis, or the produce of his free association. Reference to free association raises the question of the relation of psychoanalysis to existential psychiatry.

Freud was no existentialist, though he had a profound regard for Nietzsche's psychological insights. But Freud was something of an existentialist, at least in his recognition of the extent to which modern man is alienated from his primal self, from that which is Nature in Man. Freud regarded both nature and culture as twin millstones that grind the marrow of man's being and render his life bitter and a trial. But that despite, Freud was a 19th Century man, and shared in that

* I must hasten to add that I cannot really conceive of an existential psychiatry, *sui generi*, though I can appreciate how much psychiatry stands to gain by the incorporation of existential insight.

Century's faith in the ultimate competence of Science to render man free, prosperous, and happy.

That was Freud's belief, his faith, and many shared it with him; but with time and experience, some grew disillusioned. Freud and psychoanalysis, they found, were not enough, not adequate, to illuminate the psychological problems of modern man. Freud's orientation to man as a being, his formulations on etiology, pathology, and therapy in psychic illness, were remote to the living, unique, individual. They were abstractions, or extractions, stereotypic, projective formulations based on the concept of a generic man.

This is perhaps best reflected in Freud's doctrine on the passivity, remoteness, non-participating role of the analyst; in Freud's unique therapeutic procedure that of "free association"; and also most tellingly in the many "universals" which he enunciated, such as the Oedipus conflict, the castration fear, the pan-psychism of sexuality.

It was against this dismemberment of man, the remoteness thereby engendered, the falsity of absolute universals, the resultant alienation, the non-participating, non-committed role of the psychotherapist and of psychotherapy, that some among Freud's followers, Ferenczi, Sullivan, Horney, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, protested.

Among the so-called existential psychiatrists there are many who, if not avowed psychoanalysts, are well informed on, and basically appreciative of, Freud's historic stature and his epochal contributions to psychiatry. Existential psychiatry is not avowedly anti-Freudian nor anti-analysis, but only critical of its limitations. The existentialist emphasis is on the uniqueness of the individual and of his existence, his being. Their protest is against viewing man, the patient, as a stereotypical individual, involved in a psychopathy, to be dealt with "stereotypically." What does this mean? Some insight into its meaning can be gained from Binswanger's concept of man as confronting a triple world in which he lives, and to which he must relate. This triple world Binswanger describes as the *Umwelt* (the world around), *the Mitwelt* (the with-world), and the *Eigenwelt* (the own world).

In existential formulation these three "modes of world" are always interrelated, and always condition each other. Man lives in the *Umwelt*, *Mitwelt*, and *Eigenwelt* simultaneously. It is Binswanger's contention, shared by many of the existential psychiatrists, that classical pyschoanalysis is preoccupied primarily, if not exclusively, with the *Umwelt*.

In Freudian terms the *Umwelt* would be the reality with which the patient is required to deal "realistically."

Existential psychiatry accents the need of the individual to relate effectively to each of the components of his tri-modal world. The existential psychiatrist maintains that excessive preoccupation with any one of the world modalities, to the exclusion of the other two, is both a product and an attestation of disease.

Perhaps the most important, though rather recondite element of this formulation is the following: the *Eigenwelt* is not simply a derivative or product of the *Umwelt* and the *Mitwelt*, but rather exercises a shaping influence on the *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt*, which then reflexly operates on the *Eigenwelt;* or to paraphrase this at a simpler level, individuality is not a derivative product of nature and nurture, but itself contributes to the interplay of nature and nurture, and is thus a catalytic morphogenic factor.

This is the accent identified in existential psychiatry as the "ontology of existence". It is here that we can perceive the distinctive orientation of *existential analysis*. In existential analysis the "analyst" seeks to understand, not judgment-wise, but in simple comprehension, how the individual is dealing with his tri-modal existence in his tri-modal world. The "phenomena of his operations", what we might in psychiatry call his psychodynamic pattern, and in the case of the ill person, his psychopathology, thus represent a meaningful understandable operation. Pathology is thus perceived as a mode of relational operation. The existential analyst does not condone or condemn but merely understands.

Binswanger has described the existential analysis of a case under the title "The Case of Ellen West". It makes most interesting and, I must confess, rather disturbing reading. It is strictly a "phenomenological portrait". There is nothing in "The Case of Ellen West" that can warm the heart of the psychiatrist. There is nothing in it of the familiar depth psychoanalysis. We find nowhere any evidence of participation or intercession by the therapist. This case recitation reflects, in truth, a contemplation of the slow ingression and the ultimate triumph of death.

Yet the case recitation, chilling in its over-all perspective, is instructive in its own, peculiar way. There is a good deal in it that the analytically oriented psychiatrist can absorb and utilize in the deeper and larger comprehension of his patients.

I have underscored the fact that existential analysis, at least insofar as it is represented in Binswanger, offers little illumination on what the existential analyst *does* or, to paraphrase it, what the *technique* of the existential analyst is, and how it differs from the techniques of other psychiatric practices.

Rollo May, in his book *Existence*, emphatically affirms that existential analysis offers no novel therapeutic techniques. "The fundamental contribution of existential therapy", he writes, "is its understanding of man as *being*. It does not deny the validity of dynamism and the study of specific behavior patterns in their rightful places. But it holds that drives or dynamisms, by whatever name one calls them, can be understood only in context of the structure of the existence of the person we are dealing with. The distinctive character of existential analysis is, thus, that it is concerned with *ontology*, the science of being, and with *Dasein*, the existence of this particular being sitting opposite the psychotherapist." [8]

Referring to Binswanger's *Daseinsanalyse*, that is, existential analysis, Rollo May states: "What Binswanger termed Daseinsanalyse (Existential Analysis) represents a synthesis of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, the existentialist concepts modified by original new insights. It is a reconstruction of the inner world of experience of psychiatric patients with the help of a conceptual framework inspired by Heidegger's studies on the structure of human existence".[9]

There is in all this a great profundity and a something which is deeply appealing. And yet, to those who have wrestled with the problems of existence, Existentialism appears incomplete and hence inadequate.

Existentialism conceives of man as a sort of monadic being, floating in a realm of total indifference. It fails to take into consideration *man as a creature with an existential history*. It fails to recognize man as a *social* and hence a cultural being. The individual *emerging* out of nothingness into existence is inevitably confronted by a variety of alternatives. He is confronted with the necessity of selecting one from among the many alternatives. *That* choice is influenced by antecedent existence and by anticipatory evocatives.

To paraphrase this: man realizes his existence in the interplay of the dynamics of his past with those of his future.

I must end with one pertinent observation. Taking a closer view

of existentialism one finds that what originally seemed strange and alien begins to sound somewhat familiar. We discover like Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, that we have been, at least in some measure, thinking and acting existentially. Such indeed is the case, yet I submit that it is not quite enough. It is not enough merely to "appreciate Existentialism by non-intention". The existentialist movement, existentialist philosophy, existentialist analysis, confronts us as a deep challenge which we need to comprehend clearly and definitely.

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